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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that teachers of Chinese expose their students to traditional critical views of Chinese poetics and criticism through careful selection of poems. This approach to language study is based on the assumption that the student may gain insight and appreciation of Chinese poetry as well as a feeling for the culture. Arguments favoring poetry in the original language over translations of the originals are proposed, and techniques in using a thematic approach to poetry study are examined. (RL)

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Problems of Textbook in Teaching Chinese Poetry

Some advantages in teaching literature, especially Chinese poetry, in its original language are obvious. First of all, one may explicitly describe and analyze meter, rhyme scheme, the organization of sound elements, etc., without having to apologize to students that almost all the prosodic features in Chinese disappeared in the English translation. Secondly, students are in a situation to experience poetry both directly and on many levels rather than, oftentimes, just the ideas. This is not saying that a translation is necessarily inferior to the original. Nevertheless, it is always a different thing, because the experiences one has from reading the translation and the original tend to be different. And a third advantage may be that when one becomes excited by the original he may venture to satisfy himself by doing some translation.

However, the immediate problem in teaching Chinese poetry in the original is the lack of suitable textbooks for American college students. Cyril Birch's widely-adopted Anthology of Chinese Literature and many collections of Chinese poetry in English translations, easily available in inexpensive paperbacks, have now provided the instructor of Chin se literature in English translation a considerable range of choices. But little has been done in the preparation of

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textbooks for those whose reading ability of the Chinese language, the Classical Chinese to be specific, is rather limited. Existing textbooks and popular anthologies such as Ting Ying's 丁嬰 Chung-kuo li-tai shih hsüan 中國歷代詩選 Tai Chün-jen's 戴君仁 Shih hsüan 詩選, and T'ang shih san-pai shou 唐詩三百首 are no easy substitutions. More often than not, they prove to be unsatisfactory to the specific needs of American students.

The solution is not just two-tract or bilingual texts like the Penguin books of verse in the chief European languages, featured by printing the original poem and its line-by-line literal rendition on a same page; what would be more apropos are more specific kind of texts including a word-for-word translation, a transliteration, and explanatory notes in addition to the Chinese text and a literal translation. Among a handful of existing texts of Chinese poetry, David Hawkes' A Little Primer of Tu Fu (1967) stands out as a unique example to be consulted. It illustrates a good variety of the shih forms, including all the poems by a single major poet in T'ang shih san-pai shou, altogether thirty-five poems. In the layout of the Primer, each poem has the Chinese text, a transliteration, followed by explanations of form and historical background, line-by-line exegesis and an English prose translation. As a book inspired "to give some idea of what Chinese poetry is really like and how it works to people who either know no Chinese at all or know only a little," the

Primer would only be ideal had it been accompanied by a recording.

For a graduate course devoted to the study of Shih Ching, Bernhard Karlgren's The Book of Odes (1950) together with the separate Glosses comes in handy for classroom use. In the transcribed text, Karlgren also conveniently inserted the archaic readings of all words serving as rhymes to give a clear idea of each poem's rhyme scheme. Besides, Richard F. S. Yang's Fifty Songs from the Yüan (1967) and James J. Y. Liu's illustrated tz'u examples in his articles "The Lyrics of Liu Yung" (in Tamkang Review I:2 [October, 1970]) could also be easily adapted into classroom use. Although Yang's book was primarily a demonstration of a method of verse translation based on the strict observation of syllable counting, in the book's appendices he provided a transliteration of each Chinese poem, a word-by-word translation and a literal translation. James Liu has taken a more technical approach in discussing Liu Yung's lyrics by giving in his own terms: 1) the Chinese text; 2) a transliteration according to modern Mandarin pronunciation, together with the reconstructed Ancient Chinese pronunciations for the rhyming syllables in Karlgren's spelling, and a word-for-word translation; 3) a more idiomatic translation, following the original line for line; 4) exegetical notes; 5) a metrical diagram showing the tone pattern and rhyme scheme; 6) a critical commentary. Though only five or Liu Yung's tz'u lyrics were discussed in

the article, the entire approach is pedagogically useful to any one who happens to teach Chinese poetry.

What have been mentioned in the above are those works that provide the Chinese text, transliteration, word-for-word translation along with literal translation and explanatory notes. With some modifications on the part of the instructor, the presentation of these materials could relieve the partial needs of American students. In addition, we happily note that the rapid increase in the amount of background materials and specific studies of Chinese poets and their works in English have greatly eased some of the practical problems in teaching Chinese poetry in this country. Just to glance at the last few years, a number of good translation works devoted to single Chinese poets have appeared, such as James J. Y. Liu's The Poetry of Li Shang-yin (1969), James R. Hightower's The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien (1970) and J. D. Frodsham's The Poems of Li Ho (1970). One may only regret that none of these attached the Chinese text, yet one must recognize the usefulness of their critical commentary and apt scholarship. So, when used side by side with good editions of Chinese texts, these last-mentioned books are especially valuable aids to advanced students.

However, since the appearance of James J. Y. Liu's The Art of Chinese Poetry a decade ago, a companion anthology of Chinese poetry to be designed in such a format that would be most helpful to those who do not know enough Chinese is long

overdue. The importance to provide transliteration, word-for-word translation along with the Chinese text, literal translation and explanatory notes apparently lies in the fact that most students need to be helped out by such an elaborate presentation of the materials. Because, in teaching Chinese poetry in the original to American students, the language problem is an all present practical problem. Getting the poetic sense through, needless to say, is the first step toward a full appreciation of poetry. Also, the availability of suitable textbooks could allow the instructor to devote more time to analytical and critical discussions.

As the need for suitable textbooks are pertinent, I propose to present a personal view on what approaches may be feasible in making a general anthology of Chinese poetry for classroom use. Here I am specifically concerned at this point with an illustrative anthology of Chinese poetry rather than a comprehensive anthology. I have in mind that its potential readers will primarily be students of Chinese Literature and Comparative Literature. Therefore, the emphasis of this anthology may accordingly be limited to the examination of poetic conventions and forms, traditional critical views, and major themes.

In view of numerous evolutions in form, the genre approach may be considered useful in examining the poetic conventions and forms based on the traditional classification of Chinese verse literature into various types; usually all are implied under

the English term "poetry." Whereas in English translation, the conventional distinction between one type of poetry to another, for instance, the shih and tz'u, becomes hopelessly indistinguishable, the genre approach can afford a convenient arrangement for the instructor to discuss the characteristics and the organizational principles of each type. It is also perhaps the quickest way to familiarize the students with the development of Chinese poetry.

My suggestion to illustrate some important traditional critical views of Chinese poetics and criticism through a carefully selected group of poems is based on an assumption that from a perspective of Chinese literary tradition, the students may gain additional insight to appreciate and value poetry. Hopefully, this will inspire students towards comparative study.

Finally, the thematic approach may be used to form the last group of poems in the anthology. With such emphasis, this will show a variety of recurrent themes as reflected in Chinese poetry. It is hoped that the major themes would reveal the basic human concerns of Chinese literature.

The kind of textbook I have proposed here only represents my personal preference arising from my own teaching experience. I hope that a variety of well-prepared textbooks would appear in the next few years so that the teaching of Chinese poetry in the original could be made more popular.

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